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The Last Phase 1800–1847

PORTSMOUTH FAIR.

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Cover:
Portsmouth Free Mart Fair, early nineteenth century – a view across Grand Parade, probably from the corner of Penny Street.
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PORTSMOUTH FREE MART FAIR THE LAST PHASE 1800–1847

John Webb, MA, FRHistS

From earliest times the harbours and waterways of southern Hampshire must have attracted a cosmopolitan host of traders intent on exchanging the various goods of their native regions for local produce. It was not surprising then, that by the charter of privileges which Richard I granted in 1194 to his recently established town of Portsmouth – the founding father of which, John de Gisors, was himself almost certainly a merchant – the burgesses were empowered to hold not only a weekly market, but also, as a special boon, an annual fair lasting fifteen days.[1] Unfortunately for the economic historian, few of the medieval records of Portsmouth still remain, and there is little information about the fair until the eighteenth century, so that we have almost no idea of its earlier size, the kinds of commodities that were bought and sold there, or the extent of the region from which its merchants were drawn. It was never one of the great fairs of medieval England, like those at Winchester (St Giles's) and Stourbridge, but its fifteen days' duration, which the burgesses unsuccessfully attempted to increase to twenty days in 1585,[2] suggests that it fell somewhere in the middle rank. Like most English fairs, its commercial importance was in decline by the time of George III, and the piepowder court, established in the Middle Ages to provide expeditious justice, had long since fallen into disuse.[3] Although traders of a sort still congregated each summer in the High Street, Portsmouth Free Mart Fair had increasingly become a place of amusement, where local people of all ages and conditions, but particularly those in their teens and early twenties, could enjoy a brief respite from the monotony of their everyday existence.

The Free Mart was Portsmouth's only chartered fair, but at one time there seems to have been an annual gathering at Kingston on 29 May, the anniversary of the triumphant return of Charles II to his capital in 1660. The Portsmouth antiquary, Daniel Howard, usually a reliable source, collected evidence of its origin from a Mr Faber, whose father had been christened Charles because he had been born on fair-day.[4] It was probably never of more than limited local importance and is not to be found listed in the 1792 edition of Owen's *New Book of Fairs*, which gives fifty-six places in Hampshire where various kinds of fairs were then held. Some towns had more than one: Titchfield, for example, boasted no less than four; Southampton, more modestly, only two. Most of the country fairs combined the buying and selling of animals and farm produce with innocent amusement. At Fareham, where horses and cheese were the principal items of trade, enormous crowds congregated in good weather; in 1818 it was reported that at least 20,000 people had been present on the first day.[5] Weyhill Fair, held in October, and one of many referred to by Cobbett, was a noted centre for sales of sheep, cattle, wool and hops, and was still being described in 1841 as 'one of the greatest fairs in England'.[6] Undoubtedly the most spectacularly sited fair in the region was that held annually for three days high on Portsdown Hill, to which large numbers of Portsea islanders were drawn soon after the cessation of their own Free Mart.

Although originally held from the 1 August, the medieval feast of St Peter ad vincula, the rationalization of saints' days at the Reformation and the changes in the calendar in 1752 resulted in the Portsmouth Free Mart beginning on 10 July for most of the last century of its existence. The previous night, as twelve o'clock struck, a carved wooden hand, symbol of justice and friendship, was hung from the window of a public building, this being the town hall over the old market house from 1805 until 1836, and thereafter its successor which stood next door to the Dolphin Inn. Henry Slight, who lived in the High Street and so must have observed the event on many occasions, wrote in 1843: 'This ceremonial is performed by the sergeants-at-mace . . . and the appearance of the hand is generally welcomed with loud shouts by a crowd of spectators . . . It has generally been called the putting out of the glove; the hand, for very many years, having been represented in a gauntlet of the fashion of the days of Charles I.'[7] It was not a custom unique to Portsmouth. At Southampton, too, a gloved hand was displayed to signify the opening of Chapel Fair and removed at its closure.[8]

The traditional home of Portsmouth Free Mart Fair was the High Street, and there the traders still congregated, their stalls extending in a good year in a line from near Buckingham House down as far as Point Gate. Corporation records sometimes distinguish upper and lower fair (see Table I). Although the line of demarcation is never stated, it seems very probable that it was the old market house which stood in the middle of the road opposite St Thomas's church (now the cathedral) and interrupted the flow of traffic. Some of the traders owned the stalls which they erected on sites allocated to them by the town sergeants, who were in charge of the day-to-day organization on behalf of the Corporation; but others, so it was reported in 1824, hired theirs from two local builders who, with the tacit approval of the authorities, furnished them ready for business.[9] Not surprisingly, some of the traders who regularly attended the fair – and they included several local shopkeepers – became associated with certain favoured sites. Edward Moggridge, a London footwear manufacturer who had been visiting the mart for many years, informed his patrons in 1803 that he was 'at his old standing, facing Mr Diaper's', and William Hamper, a Bishopsgate hosier and glover, who claimed in 1830 that he and his predecessor in business had been stallholders upwards of seventy years, traded regularly opposite

Table I

FAIR STANDINGS 1819, 1821, 1823–9

	Upper fair				Lower fair								
	Stalls occupied	Stallage			Stalls occupied	Stallage			Stallage for shows			Total stallage		
		£	s.	d.		£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.
1819	53	31	15	0	21	13	4	0	10	18	0	66	7	0*
1820	*No information available*											40	15	0
1821	37	25	7	0	19	12	3	0	8	9	0	45	19	0
1822	*No information available*											48	2	6
1823	43	27	1	0	24	15	5	0	12	5	0	54	11	0
1824	47	30	5	0	25	16	19	0	12	15	0	59	19	0
1825	44	30	17	0	28	18	15	0	11	8	0	71	10	0*
1826	42	31	2	0	19	12	16	0	13	7	0	57	5	0
1827	56	36	16	0	29	18	17	0	14	9	0	70	2	0
1828	53	34	7	0	27	18	18	0	11	18	0	65	3	0
1829	41	29	9	0	28	19	15	0	7	5	0	56	9	0

*Includes £10 10s. for hire of old town hall

Sources: PCRO, CF 1/7, CF 2/15–23.

Allen's hat shop.[10] Wearing apparel and household goods were undoubtedly important articles of trade, as Owen had indicated in 1792[11] – the Free Mart Fair, apparently, had never been much concerned with livestock or farm produce – but there was always a large contingent of stall-holders who dealt in cheap bric-à-brac and the customary range of tawdry gewgaws and fairings. One eye-witness born in 1832, the young William H. Saunders, who later became the curator of the town museum, vividly described the fair in his memoirs. He recalled the lively patter of the cheapjacks who 'cajoled, bantered or bullied their hearers into buying . . . saws that would not cut, their everlastingly pointed pencils that failed to draw a line, their razors that were a torture to them later'. He told, too. of those 'bleared old women who fried their bread-bloated sausages over the little charcoal fires . . . [and] the broken-down race-course gamblers, who haunted this fair with their antiquated roulette tables, or their clumsy, spurious thimble rigging'.[12] In 1833 a Yorkshire hawker displayed an 'anti-slavery spoon', which he assured his listeners would sweeten tea without sugar.[13] Henry Slight, writing in 1838, contemptuously dismissed the merchandise as 'nothing but dolls and gingerbread'.[14]

Close by on Grand Parade were mustered the roundabouts and swings, the tents large and small, the wagons and caravans of the visiting showmen. The congestion must have been considerable even in a quiet year, and the competition for the best sites intense. According to an official statement made in 1824, the exhibitors 'generally apply previous to the fair to the town sergeants stating what quantity of ground they wish to have that it may be reserved for them, and it is accordingly parcelled out'.[15]

Table II

STALLAGE: ANNUAL RECEIPTS 1785–1800

	£	s.	d.		£	s.	d.
1785	23	5	0	1793	44	4	0
1786	26	9	6	1794	48	6	6
1787	*Not available*			1795	55	13	6
1788	28	12	0	1796	62	17	6
1789	28	17	0	1797	55	15	6
1790	31	11	0	1798	58	14	6
1791	39	12	0	1799	59	14	0
1792	33	8	0	1800	66	17	6

Note: Annual receipts for 1801–09 not available

Source: PCRO, CF 1/9

Table III

STALLAGE: ANNUAL RECEIPTS 1810–18, 1830–47

	£	s.	d.		£	s.	d.
1810	87	2	0	1830	55	18	0
1811	90	0	0	1831	60	15	0
1812	90	19	0	1832	57	3	0
1813	95	15	0	1833	46	3	0
1814	95	4	0	1834	42	15	0
1815	101	11	0	1835	47	6	0
1816	105	12	0	1836	37	2	0
1817	89	13	0	1837	48	2	0
1818	74	13	0	1838	52	15	0
[For 1819–29 see Table I]				1839	54	6	0
				1840	*Not available*		
				1841			
				1842	51	15	0
				1843	52	14	0
				1844	*Not available*		
				1845			
				1846			
				1847	57	10	0

Note: From these totals were subtracted sundry expenses which usually amounted to about £5 15s. However, in one or two cases it is possible that the sums had already been deducted from the amounts recorded.

Sources: PCRO, 11A/22/7, CCM 2/1, CF 1/7, 13; *HT*, *passim*.

Always popular were the menageries. In 1800 Pidcock's collection of birds and beasts, 'well secured in strong iron dens so that the most timorous person may approach them without fear or danger', could be seen in four caravans on payment of a shilling. But it was Mr Polito, 'the modern Noah', who came to dominate the scene during the Napoleonic Wars, and his tent with its great central chandelier is immortalized by Captain Marryat in *Peter Simple* in an incident when the young midshipman visited Portsdown Fair and witnessed the escape of a lioness.[16] After 1814 Gillman and Atkins, and later Atkins alone, succeeded Polito and displayed regularly until the 1830s, by which time fierce competition came from Wombwell's Royal Menagerie with its eighteen immense wagons, not all of which could successfully negotiate the town gates. On one occasion it was reported that 'the caravan for the enormous Siamese elephant being too large to admit of its entering . . . a temporary building has been erected on the Parade for the animal, within the area of the whole of this immense establishment'.[17]

A feature of Wombwell's exhibition were the elaborate, brilliantly coloured paintings of ferocious beasts which were hung up outside to attract customers. According to W. H. Saunders, many of these were the work of the young local artist George Cole, father of the more celebrated Vicat. Some of Wombwell's animals were imported into England through Portsmouth and until they were collected were kept in a warehouse in Bath Square on Point. When a boy, Saunders played with the son of the owner of the store and on one occasion, while mischievously investigating the latest arrivals, accidentally set loose a massive python, with the result that 'all the rabbit hutches in the neighbourhood were emptied of their furry occupants' by Wombwell's man 'to stay the hunger of the beast' and so facilitate its recapture. Saunders also recalled Wombwell's 'key bugle band', dressed as beefeaters, who performed classical and popular pieces, 'and did much to elevate the moral as well as the musical tone of the people'.[18]

Another source of great excitement each year was the circus. Then still a comparatively novel form of entertainment, it had developed from riding school displays as recently as the eighteenth century, and in the early nineteenth was still dominated by exhibitions of equestrian skill.[19] The 'Royal Tent or Amphitheatre Royal' of Mr Saunders (not related to W. H.) was a familiar sight in Portsmouth during the Napoleonic Wars. Starring Master Saunders – 'the incomparable equestrian Roscius' – and his sister – 'without exception, the first female performer on the rope, wire and horse in the world' – its parade of horses in 1809 was led by a cream coloured Arab steed, 'a royal present from his Majesty to Mr Saunders, jun., for his performances at the royal fête at Windsor'. After 1813 Adams's troupe of equestrians held sway for several years, and later many other circus owners included Portsmouth in their itineraries at the time of the fair or soon after, one being Isaac van Amburgh, a favourite of Queen Victoria, who commissioned Sir Edwin Landseer to paint a picture of him with some of his animals.

From the earliest days, melodramas, pantomimes and other popular stories which had been freely adapted to display the artists' horsemanship were included in the circus programme. In 1805 Saunders offered a melodrama called *The Turkish Slaves; or Love and Cruelty*, a sturdy, patriotic pantomime, *Harlequin Seaman; or British Tars Triumphant*, and *Billy Button's journey to Brentford*. Ten years later Adams advertised an equestrian epic entitled *Blood will have blood; or Ellena and Villeroi and the Great*

The Open Hand which was carved in 1843 by Mr William Austin to replace the hand (or glove), probably dating from the seventeenth century, which was stolen in 1841 and never recovered. The hand was hung out in the High Street at the opening of the fair and removed at its conclusion.
Portsmouth City Museums

Devil's Band, in which, he promised, 'all the horses will appear with a great variety of horsemanship, rope, dancing, &c.'.

In 1807, after several years without the presence of a travelling theatre on Parade, Jones's company of comedians arrived to delight audiences with performances which the *Hampshire Telegraph* described as 'far above mediocrity'. Two years later Signor Belzoni's troupe of dancers presented 'a new grand ballet of action' on a familiar theme, *The Algerine Pirates*, although opening night was postponed 'in consequence of his arriving in town too late, and the difficulty he experienced in obtaining a place on the Parade, together with the great trouble and length of time requisite for getting up the ballet'. In the early 1830s, two showmen, Scowton and Walton, each with his own Royal Pavilion, presented such pieces as *The Treacherous Indian; or, the British Seaman's Fidelity, Alonzo the Brave, Black-Eyed Susan,* and, appropriately for Portsmouth audiences, *Richard Parker; or the Mutiny at Spithead.*

But it was Richardson's theatre, one of the most famous of its kind, that came to be a popular attraction on the same site most years for more than a quarter of a century. Described by the local newspaper as 'a splendid affair [which] occupies an immense space on the Parade', the extravagant costumes and elaborate scenery drew generous praise from the editor. 'We have often wondered (considering the very limited sphere he acts in) how his pieces are got up in such perfection,' he wrote on one occasion, 'and can only account for it by supposing that they are written expressly for his theatre in miniature.' On the last day of the fair the company generally performed *The Death of Nelson*, an extravaganza which included the dancing of 'interminable hornpipes', according to one young member of the audience, W. H. Saunders, who also described how he followed in the wake of the crowd when the drunken trombonist from Richardson's band was removed to gaol after falling through a tobacconist's shop window.[20]

There were, too, in this part of the fair, various sideshows in which were exhibited many of the freaks and oddities for which nineteenth-century fairgoers had such an insatiable appetite. Often they were part of a circus or theatre company and famous throughout the country. Thus the 'spotted Negro boy' who came several times during the Napoleonic Wars, and was described by the *Hampshire Telegraph* as 'so matchless a curiosity', was well known for his impressions of bird songs. The indomitable and apparently indestructible Signora Josephine Giradelli, presented by Mr Richardson, was equally famous. Billed in 1816 as 'a female graceful in her person, mistress of three or four languages, and possessing that suavity of manners which is always commanding', she was said to pass red-hot irons 'over her hair, legs and tongue', as well as 'putting her hands into boiling lead, and pouring the same into her mouth, with many other surprising experiments'. In a booth adjoining the circus in 1818 was Toby, 'the sapient pig' who, it was boldly claimed in typical showman's hyperbole, 'will spell and read, cast accounts, tell the points of the sun's rising and setting . . . will discover a person's thoughts, and when asked a question will give an immediate answer . . . He is the only scholar of his race ever known or heard of in the world.' Six years later another remarkable specimen of porcine genius was reported as being able to grunt and squeak the tune of the national anthem. Perhaps the most famous human phenomenon was Miss Biffin, described as 'the eighth wonder of the world', who came regularly to the fair for several years. Born without limbs, she had perfected a number of skills which amazed her audiences. Her miniatures, painted with a brush held in her mouth, sold briskly at three to ten guineas each. Another popular sideshow was the waxworks. In 1831, 200 public figures were presented by Messrs Ewings in a series of tableaux assembled in nine caravans.

Not surprisingly some of the showmen were unable to secure a standing on Grand Parade and were forced to set

up in premises nearby. In 1808 a massive Yorkshire youth, one of a succession of giants who arrived each year, filled the patrons of the Coach and Horses with astonishment; in 1801, at 85 Point Street, the celebrated Miss Warren, 'the shortest lady ever seen', amused the populace. Before its demolition, the old town hall in the High Street was a favourite venue for showmen, including Mr Gyngell, whose demonstrations of magic, his musical glasses and his son's wirewalking act attracted 'numerous parties of the first distinction and respectability'. He was unable to take his 'machinery' to Portsdown Fair in 1817, but at least, promised the *Hampshire Telegraph*, 'the celebrated Dutch dwarf . . . will be there'. In 1824 Gyngell hired the theatre, where he presented a bill which included Indian jugglers, the Flying Hussar, and his daughter ascending a wire from the stage to the gallery 'surrounded by fireworks'. At different times fairgoers were also able to see such attractions as the Hottentot Venus at 84 High Street, Napoleon's military carriage taken at Waterloo (with the Emperor's coachman in attendance) at no. 85, a flea circus at the former Crown Hotel, and collections of waxworks and panoramas of English naval victories at the Green Row Rooms in Pembroke Road.

For the owners of meadows and yards in the heart of the town the fair was often a boom period, since such sites were much in demand by showmen unable to find a place on Grand Parade. In 1823 the Royal Circus was on a plot of land near the theatre; in 1834 and 1840 Mr Batty's gas-lit Circus Royal, 'the largest establishment in the three kingdoms', was in St Mary's Street, but in 1847, by then boasting a seating capacity of 2,000, it moved to King Street, Southsea. The landlords of houses and shops in and around the High Street were also able to profit from the event by letting vacant rooms to visiting traders. In 1809, for example, a London draper, J. Levy, took over 99 High Street. Six years later, a lace manufacturer from Northampton acquired no. 141, in 1816 moving down to no. 118. In an effort to compete, local shopkeepers obtained special consignments of goods and advertised drastic price reductions. But it was not only the shopkeepers and property owners who strove to benefit. Residents engaged in the entertainment business made special efforts to amuse the crowds. The theatre company invariably met the competition of their more glamorous Thespian rivals on Grand Parade by reviving popular pieces and putting on extra performances, and at the Crown Assembly Rooms most years there were masquerades and balls to amuse the officers and the gentry. In 1840, with less emphasis on profit, local cricketers celebrated the end of the fair by playing against the men of Hampshire on Southsea Common, which had been 'hurdled for the occasion'.

Free Mart Fair was so-called because of its participants' immunity from a multitude of tolls, but the traders and showmen who attended were required to pay a ground-rent (i.e. stallage) of a shilling for each foot of frontage of their standings, the depth being irrelevant. Collection was in the hands of the town sergeants. An inquiry into town finances in 1843 provides details of this operation and reveals that there was ample scope for fraud by dishonest officials. Richard Madgwick, the senior sergeant, with nearly forty years' experience of the office, testified:

> 'We do not get all the rents. We commence our collection at the end of the first week. The account rendered to the chamberlain shows the amount received. There is no check over the collection. We get no receipt from the chamberlain when the money is paid in; nor ever did from any chamberlain. I consider we receive generally a fair amount of the rents . . . The chamberlain does not know whether the collection is right or wrong. He takes the account as we give it to him.'

Joseph Cox, the other sergeant, elaborated on some points:

> 'There is no check or examination . . . when we leave the account, showing what has been collected. We pay the money to the bank clerk, and if it tallies with the total of our account he receives it. The account has never been disputed. We get no receipt or acknowledgement. The account goes with the treasurer's vouchers . . . We generally pay it in after the Portsdown Fair, because we sometimes collect arrears there. We receive £5 5s. 0d. *per annum* for our trouble in collecting. There can be no check over these tolls. We give no receipts to the fair people for the sums paid by them.'[21]

An examination of the surviving vouchers shows few years when stallage remained unpaid. An exception was 1828, when 'run' is written against the names of four traders, Ward, Townsend, Solomon and Springer, who jointly owed £1 14s. 0d., and Meredith, a showman, whose debt was £2 6s. 0d.[22]

More serious was the annual loss to the Corporation of stallage from traders and showmen who did not occupy town soil but operated from private property and so considered themselves exempt. In 1824 the Corporation took legal advice on the matter. Referring particularly to those who provided showmen with private sites, it explained that 'these parties intend again to let their garden and ground for the same purposes during the ensuing fair which it is conceived they have no right to do, the right of holding the

Part of an advertisement in the Hampshire Telegraph, *19 July 1802, publicizing a circus at Free Mart Fair. The woodcut showing Master Saunders was one of the earliest illustrations to be printed in a Portsmouth newspaper.*
Portsmouth Central Library

fair being granted to the Corporation and they having always received rent or toll for the erection of all standings therein'. But Mr Selwyn of Lincoln's Inn was not encouraging. 'I think that any persons have a right to erect booths or standings on their private ground for exhibition of horsemanship or purposes of mere amusement, or let the ground for these purposes without any infringement of the right of fair granted to the Corporation.'[23] And so the matter rested.

Not all the showmen and traders were as close-fisted as those on the 'fringe'. Early in the century Richardson regularly gave £5 to each of the three public charity schools before leaving the town, and in 1822 'offered to play with his company King Lear and a farce at the theatre on Wednesday evening for the benefit of the suffering Irish'. Another special performance was staged by Mr Batty in 1847 for the new Portsmouth and Portsea Hospital. In the local press in 1800 much was made of a bearded seller of Tunbridge ware at the mart who had donated £50 to provide bread for the French prisoners-of-war at Portchester.

It was the duty of the mayor as clerk of the market to test stallholders' scales, and fair-time saw a procession through the courts of greengrocers, fruiterers, gingerbread bakers, hawkers and others who were found to have deficient weights. In 1820 a problem arose when the inspecting leet jury who walked the fair 'and tried the weights at all the stalls' found on arrival at Mr Webber's 'that they could not depend upon their own scales, as they did not appear to be accurate, but they were not certain whether the inaccuracy was merely occasioned by the wetness of the day or from a defect in the beam'. When they ventured again they discovered nine traders' weights slightly deficient, but in the case of Susannah Jones, who had failed to escape in time with the incriminating evidence, 'the whole of her weights were unsound'. In 1828 Sarah Smith, a gingerbread baker, was fined £4 10s. 0d. for having four false weights, one of a pound being over two ounces deficient. In 1814 Jane Courland, a fruiterer, was fined 10s., but 'could not be found', while Conroy, a huckster, 'won't pay'.[24]

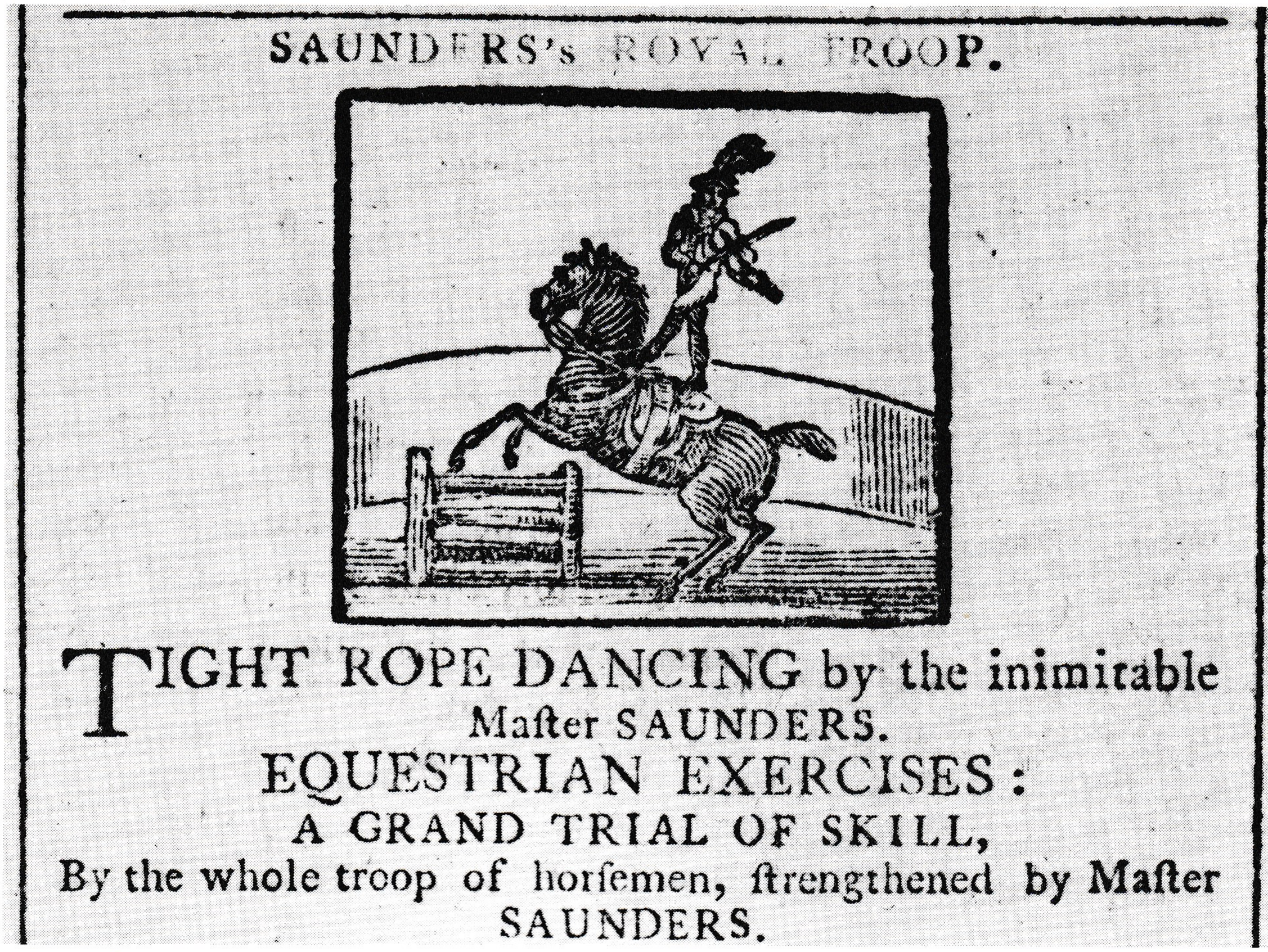
On 24 July the fair ended. The open hand was taken down by the sergeants, and on the morrow, which was commonly known as 'packing penny day', the stalls were rapidly removed and the High Street once again stood empty. On Grand Parade the shows were dismantled and put into carts and caravans which rumbled out of the Landport Gate in a long procession *en route* to Portsdown Hill to be ready for the great three-day fair which began on 26 July, where their exotic and bizarre cargoes of the biggest, the smallest, the strangest and the most stupendous, would once again with equanimity face the credulous, gaping multitude.

If contemporary writers are to be believed, the respectability of Free Mart Fair in the early years of the nineteenth century was never in doubt. The anonymous author of a local history published in 1801 spoke of the owners of the booths as providing the inhabitants 'with all that is gay, useful and agreeable'. The High Street, he continued, afforded 'a most delightful saunter to those who are desirous of enjoying the scenes of a fair, replete with mirth in all its motley garb of diversified spectacle', and he went on to reproduce at length a poem on the glories of Portsmouth Fair which had appeared the previous year in the *Hampshire Telegraph*.[25] Another poetic outpouring published by that paper in 1801 was equally laudatory, and seemed to visualize the heart of Portsmouth each mid-July as an urban extension of Arcady, to which were summoned the 'pastoral nymphs' and 'rustic shepherds' of the Portsea Island 'plains' (see Appendix).

Off Toulon in June 1804 William Shoveller, a bored and homesick young surgeon in the English navy, had the local fairs in mind when he wrote nostalgically to his sister Betsy in Portsea. 'I believe I am never more to accompany you to the Free Mart or Portsdown Fair, [and] need not say I should be happy to be there, as I think together with the ladies on the other side of the water, we could form an agreeable and interesting party.' A few weeks later when he wrote again he returned to the subject. 'Tell me how you enjoyed yourselves at the Free Mart and Portsdown fairs. I would have given a trifle to have been at home.'[26] That year, in fact, after a wet start, the weather improved sufficiently to make Portsmouth 'the resort of genteel company from a circle of many miles'.[27] The shows on Parade were particularly popular with the carriage folk. 'Such is the display of fashion and character,' it was written of Saunders's circus in 1805, 'that the amphitheatre (large as it is) can scarcely accommodate the number of distinguished visitors that resort to it every evening.' In 1834 the governor of Portsmouth, Sir Thomas McMahon, and his wife, with other local gentry, attended Batty's circus in St Mary's Street; six years later his successor patronised the Royal Circus, where the boxes were filled with 'fashionables' from the neighbourhood – 'the whole presenting a *coup d'oeil* of great magnificence'.[28] Rich and poor, masters and men, servicemen and civilians, it seemed, mingled happily in the common pursuit of business and pleasure.

Among visitors to the fair in 1818 was the Revd John Skinner, an antiquary, who was on a tour of the Isle of Wight, Hampshire and Wiltshire. On 18 July he wrote:

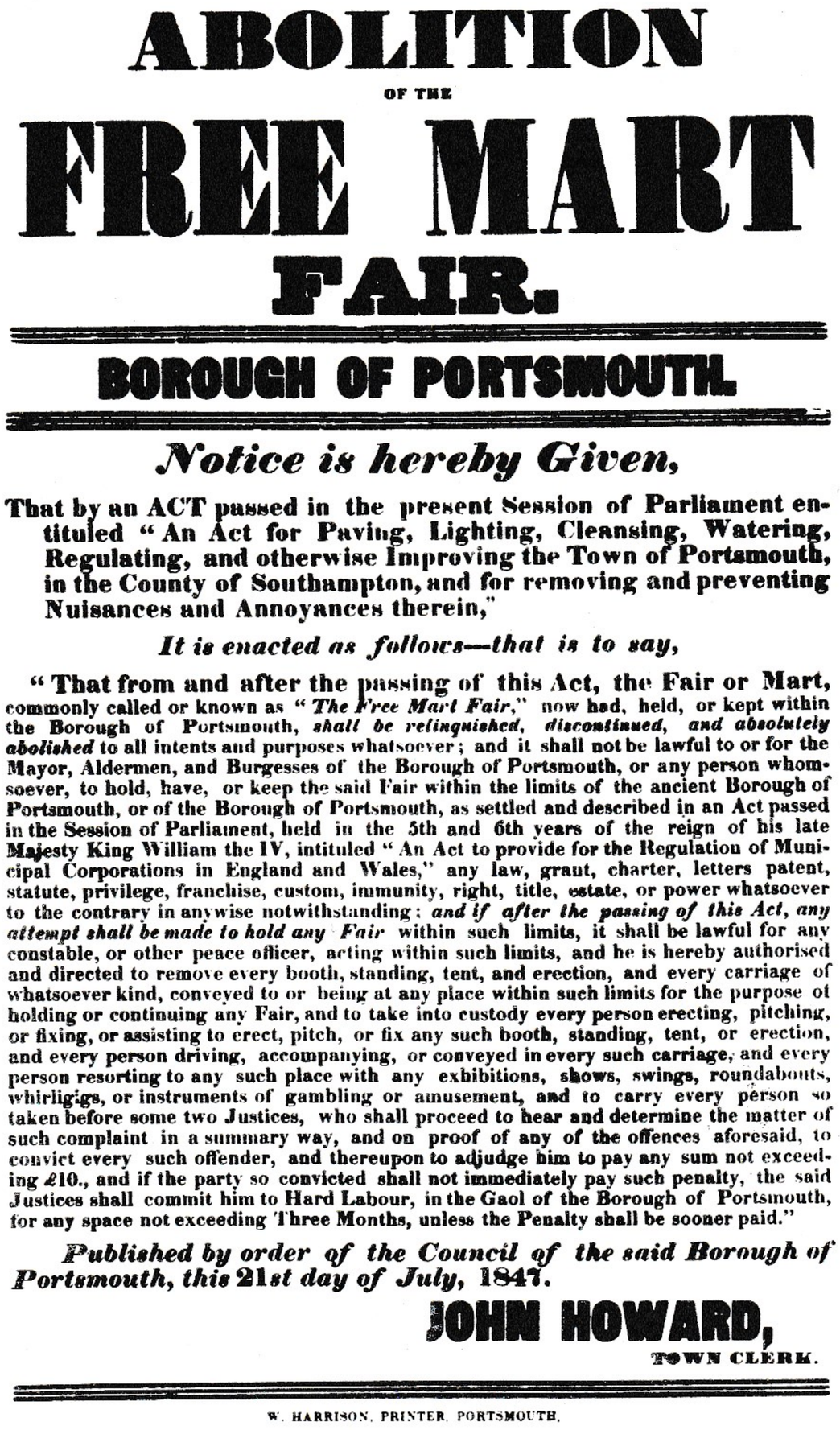
> 'After breakfast we rowed (from Ryde) to Spithead, amongst the shipping, and afterwards to Portsmouth, where we landed, to shew the children the wonders of the fair. We examined in turn the differ-



ent exhibitions of lions, &c.; giants, dwarfs, puppet shows, &c.; and walked the whole length of the fair, reaching quite across the town to the ramparts; the booths exhibiting every article for the body, also some for the mind, there being a large stall of books where I purchased the *Vicar of Wakefield* for Laura.'[29]

Another, more distinguished, diarist was an ardent fairgoer during his teens and early twenties. This was Frederic Madden, then living at home with his parents in St Thomas's Street and recording his daily life in unremitting detail. 'If the man exists,' he wrote in an article published in 1822, 'who could walk through the last Portsmouth Fair, and not encounter something odd enough to make him relax his muscles, he must be more than mortal, and should be banished from society to the shores of Zembla.' For young Madden the Free Mart was harmless fun. 'I doubt much if any person was ever made *worse* by partaking the enjoyments of a fair; and surely pleasure is too transient in our lives to make us such cynics as to snarl at what creates a laugh, even if we do not feel disposed to join in it ourselves.'[30] In 1819, when his distinguished uncle, General Madden, came to stay, the two men strolled round the booths, finally visiting the 'beast show'. Two years later the mart coincided with the great coronation fair in Hyde Park, to which the leading showmen preferred to go, but Madden still enjoyed himself and spent 14s. on trinkets of silver and false gold for his friend Mary Hayton, whom many years later he married. Another day he looked over the bookstalls, obviously much favoured by the more literate fairgoers, where he found a number of early editions of quality. But by now personal problems were troubling him and 'our delectable mart', as he once described it, was losing his interest. On 11 July 1823 he wrote: 'Our noisy fair has commenced as usual, but it interests me little and I shall be glad when it is over.' However, rather reluctantly he accompanied his mother and sisters to the circus, which was 'crammed, as it is every night'. He added: 'Indeed the performances are so attractive that the admiral's family were induced to go last night and intend to pay it a second visit.' Towards the end of the fair he decided to give identical presents to Mary Hayton and her sister. He purchased one pair of horsehair bracelets but could not procure another. Luckily 'am promised by a woman belonging to one of the bazaars in town [London] to have another pair sent me through my brother Henry'.[31]

At a time when there were few permanent collections of foreign birds and beasts in this country – Regent's Park Zoo was not opened until 1828 – and geographical exploration was making scholars aware of many new kinds of exotic creatures, menageries were considered to have an important educational value. 'However people may differ



ABOLITION
OF THE
FREE MART
FAIR.

BOROUGH OF PORTSMOUTH.

Notice is hereby Given,

That by an ACT passed in the present Session of Parliament entituled "An Act for Paving, Lighting, Cleansing, Watering, Regulating, and otherwise Improving the Town of Portsmouth, in the County of Southampton, and for removing and preventing Nuisances and Annoyances therein,"

It is enacted as follows—that is to say,

"That from and after the passing of this Act, the Fair or Mart, commonly called or known as "***The Free Mart Fair,***" now had, held, or kept within the Borough of Portsmouth, ***shall be relinquished, discontinued, and absolutely abolished*** to all intents and purposes whatsoever; and it shall not be lawful to or for the Mayor, Aldermen, and Burgesses of the Borough of Portsmouth, or any person whomsoever, to hold, have, or keep the said Fair within the limits of the ancient Borough of Portsmouth, or of the Borough of Portsmouth, as settled and described in an Act passed in the Session of Parliament, held in the 5th and 6th years of the reign of his late Majesty King William the IV, intituled "An Act to provide for the Regulation of Municipal Corporations in England and Wales," any law, grant, charter, letters patent, statute, privilege, franchise, custom, immunity, right, title, estate, or power whatsoever to the contrary in anywise notwithstanding: ***and if after the passing of this Act, any attempt shall be made to hold any Fair*** within such limits, it shall be lawful for any constable, or other peace officer, acting within such limits, and he is hereby authorised and directed to remove every booth, standing, tent, and erection, and every carriage of whatsoever kind, conveyed to or being at any place within such limits for the purpose of holding or continuing any Fair, and to take into custody every person erecting, pitching, or fixing, or assisting to erect, pitch, or fix any such booth, standing, tent, or erection, and every person driving, accompanying, or conveyed in every such carriage, and every person resorting to any such place with any exhibitions, shows, swings, roundabouts, whirligigs, or instruments of gambling or amusement, and to carry every person so taken before some two Justices, who shall proceed to hear and determine the matter of such complaint in a summary way, and on proof of any of the offences aforesaid, to convict every such offender, and thereupon to adjudge him to pay any sum not exceeding £10., and if the party so convicted shall not immediately pay such penalty, the said Justices shall commit him to Hard Labour, in the Gaol of the Borough of Portsmouth, for any space not exceeding Three Months, unless the Penalty shall be sooner paid."

Published by order of the Council of the said Borough of Portsmouth, this 21st day of July, 1847.

JOHN HOWARD,
TOWN CLERK.

W. HARRISON, PRINTER, PORTSMOUTH.

Poster proclaiming the abolition of Portsmouth Free Mart Fair, 1847.
Portsmouth Central Library

as to the advantages or disadvantages of our annual fair,' the editor of the *Hampshire Telegraph* wrote in 1822, 'it must be allowed on all hands that the bringing within our reach an extensive collection of noble and rare animals from all quarters of the world, is a real good, more particularly to the youth of our neighbourhood.' It was a point he was to make on at least one further occasion.[32] No doubt the poor law authorities were in full agreement, since in the overseers' accounts for 1810 expenses of 5s. 6d. were explained by the terse entry: 'Children in house – Free Mart.'[33] But Mr Laws, master of the Royal Naval and Marines' Children's Home, seems not to have been motivated by educational aims when he took some of his pupils to the fair in 1847. 'A complaint having been made to the committee,' the orphanage records tell us, 'that Mr Laws had employed five boys during the late Free Mart Fair to sell ginger-beer . . . Mr Laws was called in and addressed by the chairman expressing the decided disapprobation of the committee on the past occurrence and warning him that should it ever be repeated he would be dismissed.' That year's fair was in fact the last, but in 1849 Mr Laws was discharged 'in consequence of his conduct not being satisfactory'.[34]

But if the fair received the implicit approval of all classes early in the century, attitudes were slowly changing. Voices began to be raised in protest at the less agreeable aspects of the annual carnival of fun. In 1828 the *Hampshire Telegraph* commented: '. . . from the abundance of mountebanks, theatres, wild beasts, prancing horses, and the travelling Vauxhall, which have made their attractions public, as much noise, riot, and dissipation as usual may be fully anticipated';[35] and in the *Report* which preceded the 1835 Municipal Corporations Act one reads:

> 'The fair is held in the heart of the town of Portsmouth. It creates great dissatisfaction among the respectable inhabitants. Disreputable characters of every sort haunt the town during its continuance, and the streets are in a state even more disorderly than usual. Many of the inhabitants quit Portsmouth for the time to avoid the nuisance.'[36]

By the late 1830s the earlier intermittent murmurs of protest were becoming more regular and less temperate, and during the next decade swelled into a well orchestrated chorus of dissent. Madden's 'delectable mart' was no longer thought of by the articulate as a harmless annual diversion; it had become 'this accursed fair', the object of bitter, often extravagantly expressed, criticism which, when analysed, is seen to have provided five main arguments.

In the first place, many of the residents were no longer willing to tolerate the inconvenience which the mart caused. Fifteen days was a long time to have to put up with constant noise and congestion in the town centre. The Revd Cumyns spoke of the High Street as 'a crowded walk not unlike the bazaars of the East',[37] and W. H. Saunders wrote: 'It took you ten minutes to pass the governor's house so great was the crowd.'[38] At night petty criminals and prostitutes lurked in doorways, and drunken revellers staggered home singing raucously to an unappreciative audience of residents. The *Hampshire Telegraph* angrily protested 'that the quiet of almost every family in the town is absolutely broken up for fifteen mortal days of each season; no work can be steadily performed, no sleep obtained, neither age nor infancy, nor even sickness, has the least chance of rest during this disgusting Saturnalia'.[39]

Secondly, the fair was thought to put temptation in the way of the lower orders. The poor, it was claimed in 1840, were so eager to participate in the revelry that many pawned their possessions. Lt Dixon, R.N. investigated and substantiated this allegation:

> '. . . I have found that many poor unfortunate and deluded creatures had, in many instances, not only pawned their beds, but even their wearing apparel

to go to the fair, and an individual pawnbroker, whose veracity may be depended on, informed me some time since, that he has been in the habit of taking in beds to pawn, to the number of from 40 to 50 a few days previous.'[40]

Masters claimed that some servants, 'corrupted in their tastes and habits', neglected their duties and stole in order to find the means to satisfy their appetite for fun. 'For it is held universally as a privilege among our servants that they may go to the fair. If this leave be refused desertion immediately takes place . . .'[41] In fact some servants accompanied their employers on visits to the mart, and showmen invariably admitted them at reduced rates. Thus to meet and wonder at the diminutive Miss Warner, ladies and gentlemen paid a shilling, tradesmen sixpence, and servants threepence.[42] It was also said that some of the many servicemen who visited the fair forgot their responsibilities in the fever of excitement and deserted rather than miss the fun. A naval officer writing in 1840 had personal experience of the evil:

> 'What desertions, or going on shore without leave, have I not seen. What punishments and disratings have I not witnessed, consequent upon Free Mart Fair. How often have ships been detained from prosecuting a voyage of great importance by her men, or some of them, both in the king's and merchant service . . . Some of our best hands in the Royal Yacht in 1827 had the assurance to stay beyond their leave, and some of these fine young men were the actual bargemen of the Lord High Admiral, and why? Only from the inducements held out by Free Mart Fair.'[43]

Thirdly, the occasion was a magnet for all manner of malefactors. Again and again the local records tell of thefts from stalls, stolen purses and other petty crimes. A casual glance at the borough sessions papers a century earlier shows that this was not a new development: in 1711, for example, a Portsmouth staymaker was robbed of a dozen or more stomachers, another stallholder of about 29 ells of material, and a third of five silk handkerchiefs.[44] At a Council meeting in 1840, the experienced attorney Daniel Howard averred that there was always 'a vast increase of crime in this borough during the Michaelmas quarter, in which the fair occurs; and he proved from the gaol returns during the past ten or twelve years . . . that the duration of the fair filled our gaol with ruffians from all parts of the kingdom'.[45] It was the annual influx of pickpockets which seems to have caused the authorities the greatest concern. In 1805 one man accused of stealing 15s. 6d. received seven years' transportation, and a second who had snatched a pocket-book was sentenced to three months in gaol and two public whippings. Already there were organized gangs of pickpockets at work moving about the country from fair to fair. In 1815, when ninety suspicious characters were gaoled during fair-time, John Wilson and William Jones, 'of creditable appearance', were transported for seven years for stealing Captain Mottley's pocket-book. Wilson was said to have removed it, passed it to Jones, who then handed it to another accomplice who escaped. The same year Groves, a notorious Bristol criminal, was apprehended 'with a gang of male and female pickpockets (of which he is chief) and charged with committing various other depredations at our fair'. Apparently Groves had led a charmed life since he was said to have been tried fifteen times for capital offences, 'and escaped from punishment through some accidental circumstance' on each occasion. The following year three pickpockets were alleged to have been discharged from the convict hulks at Portsmouth only six months earlier. In 1836, towards the end of the fair, there was news of a great influx of thieves 'of a coarser description than usual', and it was said that 'The utmost vigilance must be exercised to keep them out.' Accordingly on 23 July the watch committee, which had already been meeting daily, decided to reinforce the police, and law and order was successfully maintained. Throughout this period the authorities invariably gaoled and 'amused with hard work' anyone they considered to be covered by the legal definition 'rogue and vagabond', whether or not an offence had been committed. Three boys from London who were apprehended in 1813 were pressed into naval service; another, William Udell, 'for stealing a pair of shoes from off the feet of a soldier who was intoxicated and asleep on the ramparts', received two months' hard labour. But theft from the person, although common, was only one of a range of crimes which occurred at fair-time. In 1806 a stallholder, Betty Beswick, was arrested and sentenced to twelve months' imprisonment for passing counterfeit coins, 42 shillings and 63 sixpences having been found in her possession, while in the year of Waterloo Jane le Roy, a French woman, was alleged to have exposed indecent prints for sale.[46] An erroneous but commonly held view in Portsmouth in the early nineteenth century was that during the fair no person could be arrested for debt, a privilege that was supposed to be connected in some way with the wooden hand hung out at the town hall.[47]

The fourth major criticism, often expressed in strong language, was that the fair was a source of moral evil. As the *Hampshire Telegraph* put it in October 1840:

> 'Ever since the termination of the last long war,

JULY 22. 1847. ABOLITION of FREE M

The last Free Mart Fair, 1847, a water-colour painting by R. H. C. Ubsdell (see p.18), showing the booths on Grand Parade as viewed from the High Street. On the left, in front of the bank (60 High Street), is a stall with toys. Of particular interest is the model train (the railway had only just arrived in Portsmouth). One poster advertises a Vauxhall; another gives notice of the fair's abolition (see p. 10 for the original). This painting, or a copy, was displayed in the Portsmouth Museum before the Second World War. It is now in the Dolphin, Old Portsmouth, and is reproduced by kind permission of Whitbread Wessex Ltd.

which, amongst its many curses, brought with it the terrific demoralization of Portsmouth, we have been gradually recovering our character; and but for the recurrence of this scourge, we might long ere this time have defied the accusations of the country. But, truly, if we do consent to foster in our bosom, to encourage, or even to let alone, such a Pandora's box as Free Mart Fair, we have no right or title to complain of such censure.'

It also commented somewhat coyly:

> 'We could tell, if it were decent to tell publicly, of scenes which occur during the fair of cruel seductions, such as no other town in the empire is guilty of, and to which, out of delicacy, we shall no further allude, than to hint that it has reference to persons of an age so tender, as to make us shudder when we even allude to the monstrosity of the deeds which are here perpetrated during that licentious period.'

The drinking and dancing booths were attacked as being the chief cause of the most reprehensible behaviour, and critics spoke of 'the excitements of music, drinking, dancing, and other kinds of profligate wantonness, carried on all night long'. In 1840 the high incidence of drunkenness was commented on by the mayor, who remarked that it was not punishable in the borough 'in consequence of there being no stocks'.[48]

The most notorious of these booths were the so-called Vauxhalls, which were a feature of the fair from the early 1820s. Situated on private ground, they were often quite elaborate, brilliantly illuminated – one in 1830 was said to be decorated with 10,000 variegated lamps – with bands playing music for 'country dances, lancers and quadrilles', and refreshments 'comprising every delicacy of the season'. Some evenings masquerades and fancy dress balls were organized, and in 1832, when there were three Vauxhalls in the town, one proprietor celebrated the passing of the Reform Bill with a grand affair, admission to which was reduced to sixpence 'in order to comply with the state of the times'. As early as 1825 the Vauxhalls had earned such a bad name that the Corporation sought legal advice on the best way to control them. Referring to the previous year's Vauxhall, which had been erected on ground near the barracks, it alleged:

> 'It is opened about 7 or 8 o'clock in the evening and is kept open during the whole night until daylight in the morning, and even after that, and being the resort of all classes of males and females it is the source of considerable moral evil. The admission to this place is one shilling and there are refreshments supplied to the company. The shows and other booths and standings in the fair are always closed before 12 o'clock.'[49]

We are fortunate in having two brief eye-witness descriptions of these booths. Frederic Madden, aged twenty-two, very studious but fun-loving, and proud of his skill as a dancer, ventured inside in 1823 and was horrified at what he saw. 'Such a scene!' he wrote. 'About 300 women of the town, painted and dressed out, dancing, eating and drinking, with as many men smoking, swearing, &c., &c. It quite sickened me, and I hastened home to my books.'[50] W. H. Saunders, only fifteen years old when the fair was abolished, described

> '. . . the Vauxhall dimly lighted with the crowned V.R. in smudgy lamps and usually patronised with couples who danced on the rickety boards to the gloomy strains of a harp, a fiddle, and a trombone; the solids and liquids of very indifferent quality, and dispensed at a price that would startle the holiday people of today. Yet decorous tradesmen and people of respectability who came out to "enjoy the fair" danced quadrilles and country dances cheek by jowl with very questionable partners, with the gravity of judges.'[51]

The Corporation having found that there was no legal way of closing such booths probably kept them under close scrutiny, and the showmen do seem to have reacted sensibly, since their advertisements for some years spoke of the need to close 'at a reasonable hour'. In 1831 the *Hampshire Telegraph* reported that the proprietor of the Royal Vauxhall had fulfilled his promise to maintain good order and exclude troublemakers. However, when he later moved his tent to Portsdown Fair, his attempts to eject 'with opprobrious language' a Portsea clothier, whom he accused of not buying a ticket, led to a charge of assault, a £5 fine, the provision of sureties for his good behaviour, and the magistrates' forthright condemnation of 'the conduct pursued in the Vauxhall'.[52]

Finally, there were those who thought the fair an anachronism. They looked back nostalgically at a time, not so many years before, when, in the absence of shopping facilities in the country villages, it had still played a useful commercial role. Thus the editor of the *Hampshire Telegraph* wrote:

> 'Time was, and even in our partial remembrance, when the Free Mart Fair was a boon to the town and a service to the country folks round Portsmouth,

who came in flocks to visit it. We can recollect when our country friends, in defiance of bad parish roads, and turnpike roads in very little better state, paid their annual visit to the fair, and many a tradesman received the amount of his annual account; but still more, we recollect these same country people laid in their stock of tea, had their choice of large parcels of stockings, and madam purchased her annual silk gown. Many a grown man will now remember that in the years of the Revolution he was breeched at a shop in the market-place; and even our mercers in those days obtained large additions to their stock-in-trade.'[53]

Portsmouth Fair, a critic said condescendingly in 1840, 'was an institution of other days, and not of these . . . it belonged to times essentially barbarous, and was therefore altogether unsuited to the present epoch of improvement and refinement'. Fairs had been conceived originally 'not for a holiday, or a period of amusement or revelry . . . but for positive business'. Another opponent was equally contemptuous. 'Free Mart Fair was originally intended to bring the means of life to the doors of the poor, but now the charter was perverted to bring into the town prostitutes, fat beasts and lean, men giants and dwarfs, conjurers, pickpockets, tumblers and other abominations . . .'[54] Such critics believed that the fair should be judged solely on its original medieval function. That it had evolved over the centuries into an institution popular primarily for the purchase of pleasure rather than for the purchase of provisions, and so had come to satisfy another need just as effectively, was irrelevant.

During the early 1830s municipal reform was much debated nationally. In Portsmouth the *Hampshire Telegraph* suggested that the opportunity should be taken to change the traditional organization of Free Mart Fair. On 29 July 1833 it recommended 'that it should be urged upon the Commission of Enquiry into Corporation matters, when it sits here, that our Free Mart should be abridged in its duration to four days . . . by which much riot and unseemly behaviour on the Sabbath would be avoided'. In the event, despite echoes of local criticism of the fair in the commissioners' *Report*, nothing was done to abate what had become an annual nuisance in the eyes of the newspaper which had once rejoiced in its traditional virtues. However, it continued to labour the point at every opportunity, and by July 1840, despite its protest that it was no killjoy, had been confirmed 'in a long formed opinion of its utter uselessness and mischief'. On 5 October the editor, 'with the utmost confidence', challenged the warmest advocate of the fair 'to bring forward, not many, but one single legitimate argument in its favour. We never heard one, we know of none, and we most solemnly believe that, of all the classes who may be influenced more or less by its existence, there is none which really derives benefit from its continuance.'

By this time, however, the initiative had been taken, with the support of some of the inhabitants of St Thomas's ward, by Major Joseph Oates Travers (*c.* 1780–1865), one of the forgotten worthies of early nineteenth-century Portsmouth. Garrison barrack-master since 1822, sometime chairman of the Portsea Island Board of Guardians, magistrate and local town councillor, [55] he was principally responsible for the setting up in September 1840 of a Corporation committee to draft bye-laws which would deal with the fair and other alleged nuisances. For a while it seemed that the critics would soon have their way, not merely reforming the mart but peremptorily abolishing it. It was, however, a false dawn for Travers and his supporters. The sequence of events is best summed up in the words of the outraged editor of the *Hampshire Telegraph* who, after referring to the appointment of the committee, went on:

> 'On the 1st of March the report of the committee alluded to was submitted to the Council, recommending the abolition of the fair, and the adoption of certain bye-laws. The motion for abolishing the fair was then, at the request of the committee, brought forward by Major Travers, and carried in a very full Council by a majority of 30 to 15. At a Council meeting on the 22nd of the same month, a motion was carried for the appointment of a committee to carry into effect the resolution of the Council to put down the fair, and that committee followed up the decision of the Council, by announcing, about a fortnight back, through the newspapers, and by the circulation of printed bills in all the neighbouring towns, that the fair would not be held in future; and yet, on Monday last, the Council, without any previous notice of such intention, absolutely eat its own words . . .'

The Council's decision to hold the fair as usual seemed to be a brazen volte-face. But the resolution passed unanimously on 14 June only temporarily shelved the earlier plan in order that 'the proceedings of this Council respecting the Free Mart Fair be more generally known . . .'[56] The immediate reason seems to have been a growing awareness of the implications of outright abolition, including the loss of income from stallage, and an appreciation of

Grand Parade, looking from the High Street towards the ramparts, May 1853. The colonnaded main guardhouse, from which the sentries around the fortifications were posted, was demolished in 1883.
Portsmouth City Museums

the legal complexity of an operation which originally the councillors had naively considered to be simple and straightforward. In the heated debate of early March, Henry Slight, local physician and amateur antiquary, had contended that the Council had no power to abolish a chartered fair. 'If they were to pass a law, therefore, to suppress it, it would be a law of no effect, for parties would claim their chartered privileges.' The *Hampshire Telegraph* had sneered at 'such antiquated notions', [57] but by November the wiser heads of the Corporation had come round to the conclusion 'that the only effectual mode of accomplishing the object in view is by obtaining an Act of Parliament, and that as the borough fund cannot be applied to such a purpose, it appears to this committee that the only mode of effecting it is by a public subscription'.[58]

Meanwhile the 1841 fair had come and gone, but not without a clumsy attempt having been made to stop it by some misguided person or persons who thought that by stealing the glove from its hanging place outside the new town hall all business would be forced to a halt. 'We regret this,' commented the *Hampshire Telegraph*, 'not for its value, but that it was very ancient, having been in use above two hundred years . . . we trust, therefore, that the party who took it, probably from a joke, will return it to the sergeant-at-mace forthwith.' Alas, the carved gauntlet was never recovered. In 1843 Henry Slight reported mysteriously that it had been sent across the Atlantic 'to spread throughout the United States the customs of the Old World'. He went on: 'To remedy this paltry and unjustifiable theft, a new open hand has this year been prepared by subscription of many of the inhabitants of the High Street . . . It was carved by Mr William Austin of East Street.'[59] Almost literally, in response to the anti-fair faction, the traditionalists had thrown down the gauntlet.

The relative strength of the emerging parties for and against the fair had begun to become apparent the previous year. In March 1841, Emanuel Emanuel, a High Street goldsmith, had been elected to the Council in place of Major Travers, who had resigned soon after setting in train the movement for abolition.[60] Emanuel now took over as spokesman of those intent on suppression, on 2 May 1842 presenting to the Council an anti-fair petition from 107 of his constituents, most of whom were High Street shopkeepers. Emanuel went on to propose that as an interim measure the 1842 Free Mart should be removed from the High Street, and he tentatively suggested Southsea Common as an alternative venue. After discussion it was decided to set up a committee to report within a month on the feasibility of such a step. Hard upon the heels of Emanuel's supporters' petition came another from a rival group of 139 inhabitants of St Thomas's ward who opposed any attempt to change the fair's site. These memorialists, many of whom were also shopkeepers in and around the High Street, accepted that the mart 'may be an annoyance to others not in trade, or whose trade may not be affected by it, yet it is of no serious injury to any person' and argued that it 'is of great benefit to many'. They drew attention to the large number of persons from the area who brought their families to the fair and spent freely in the shops, and 'your memorialists greatly depend in their trade upon the benefits to be derived from the said fair as at present held'. Moreover their property would depreciate in value if the fair was removed. Recalling the recent loss to the town of several important sources of profit, such as the Victualling Department, which had been transferred to Gosport, they urged the Council not to inflict another injury, 'lest by continually stripping or depriving Portsmouth of its old accustomed sources of expenditure and circulation of money it be ultimately ruined in its trade and benefits'.[61]

This petition was presented to the Council on 23 May 1842, but for the time being at least the signatories had no need to worry. The committee charged with the task of finding an alternative site for the fair had had no success. They reported that the only places which had been proposed for the purpose were 'the glacis between the fortifications and the drain from Hambrook Street to the beach', and 'Parade, from the King's Arms towards the Governor's Green, including the same, and Penny Street as far as Green Row, neither of which places in the opinion of your committee is suitable for the purpose'.[62] The glacis had in fact been suggested as an alternative site during a cholera scare in 1832, but had been rejected because removal there was said to be 'injurious to many different interests'.[63] So the High Street and Grand Parade remained the setting for the fair during its few remaining years. Only when the town was being paved in the 1770s, and Free Mart was held temporarily in St Thomas's Street, was it ever moved in modern times from its traditional site.[64]

During the next year or two there seems to have been a brief lull in the anti-fair campaign, although renewed efforts were made to control the stallholders and showmen. In response to complaints from some of the High Street residents, the commissioners for paving and lighting at their meeting on 13 June 1842 'ordered that notice be given to all persons erecting stalls during Free Mart Fair that they shall on no account make any holes nor remove any stone or stones in the street or pavements . . .'; and also that a letter be written to the mayor 'requesting that in directing the situation in which the fair be held he give instructions that no part of the stalls be erected on or over the foot pavements and that no goods, wares or merchandises shall be placed or exposed for sale thereon'.[65] On 22

June, 'Regulations respecting the approaching Free Mart Fair' which were circulated on the mayor's behalf included such a decree against obstruction. In addition, gutters in front of stalls were to be covered with boards so placed as to be easily removed for cleansing the watercourses. More controversially, the layout of the fair was newly defined:

> 'The line of stalls, on the north side of the High Street, to commence near Golden Lion Lane [Lombard Street], and to be continued towards the east or upper end of the High Street, leaving a good and sufficient opening into and from White Horse Lane [Highbury Street]. The shows to be on the Parade, and to be set back a proper distance from the line of the High Street; and for the sake of public convenience and thoroughfare, there are to be no shows, booths, or stalls between Golden Lion Lane and the Victoria Pier. Persons who have been accustomed to have stalls in particular situations to be accommodated, as far as practicable, consistently with the above arrangement, the design of which is to prevent obstructions and accidents at the lower end of the High Street.'[66]

At once a special meeting of the Council was obtained by six members in order to have the regulations withdrawn, since they believed that the short notice given of these changes was unfair to the traders concerned. They also protested against 'the narrow space behind the standings if erected at the upper end of the High Street, and the almost certain loss to the borough fund arising from any alteration'. But their motion to allow stallholders 'to occupy any part of the High Street on the north side' failed, much to the delight of the *Hampshire Telegraph*, which considered the proceedings 'a gross insult to the mayor in his official capacity'.[67]

About this time a renewed attempt was also made to control the Vauxhalls, which had for long been a feature of Portsmouth's principal festive occasions. The bye-law which was eventually drafted and carried unanimously 'with applause' at a Council meeting on 28 October 1844, stated that the owner of any temporary or permanent premises used in the borough during the fair, the regatta or the races 'for the purpose of drinking, music, dancing, or other amusements, between the hours of 12 at night and 5 o'clock in the morning, shall for every such offence forfeit and pay a sum not exceeding £5'. A small group of councillors who agreed with the general principle protested that it was 'class legislation' to interfere with the booths and not public houses (which had been specifically excluded from the bye-law), 'in which as much drunkenness and riot prevailed, and was kept up to quite as late an hour during the fair'. It was pointed out to them that the management of such establishments was already controlled by law, and landlords were subject to penalties imposed by the magistrates should they keep open at unreasonable hours or allow the peace to be disturbed.[68] The bye-law, having been approved by the Queen in Council, came into force before the 1845 fair, but whether the police bothered to implement it was in doubt. At a Council meeting in late September, Henry Slight successfully proposed that a return should be made of 'the names of such persons as, during the fair, offended against the bye-law'. The superintendent of police promptly informed the town clerk 'that no offence has come to my knowledge'.[69]

During the following year the inevitability of the fair's abolition became increasingly apparent. Petitions against its continuance helped to fortify the Council's will: one from 106 inhabitants of the High Street, Pembroke Road and the Parade was presented by Emanuel Emanuel; others came from the residents of Landport and Southsea, and from 34 members of the Southsea Ebenezer Chapel; later the magistrates, the clergy and the Board of Guardians added their voices to the clamour.[70]

On 10 October 1846 the Home Secretary was informed that 'having failed in all their endeavours to discontinue and discourage the fair', the Corporation was satisfied 'after mature consideration that there are no means of accomplishing its abolition short of legislative interference'.[71] The ideal solution to the problem came with plans for a new Portsmouth Improvement Bill. When George K. Rickards and James W. Higgins visited the

A section of the High Street from Charpentier's Stranger's Guide *(1842). The buildings shown include the house and shop of Emanuel Emanuel (no. 101), the home of Dr Henry Slight (no. 100), the new Market House and Guildhall, and the Dolphin (no. 41).*

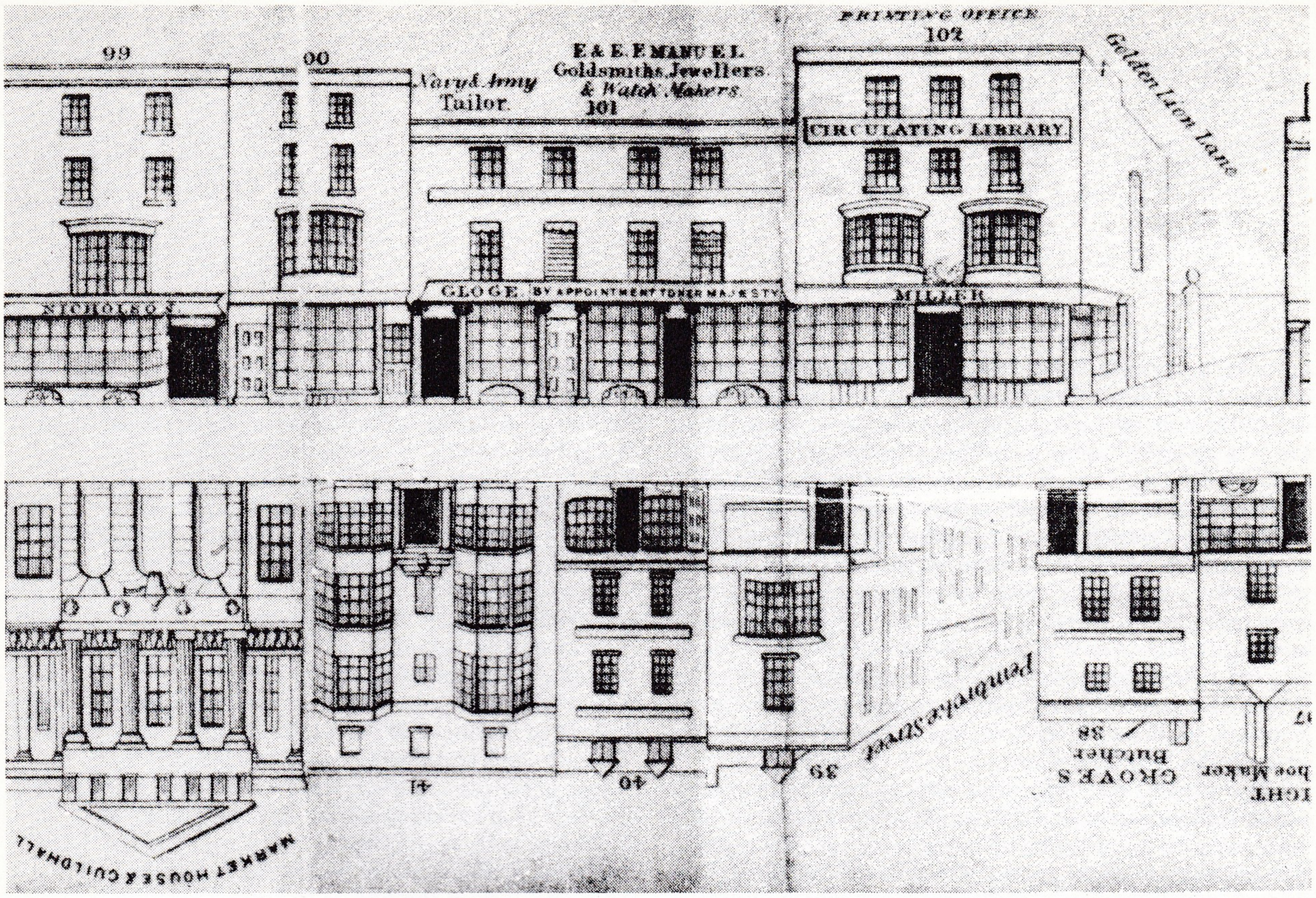
town to collect evidence for Parliament in January 1847 and were asked about the future of the fair, the burgesses were told that the commissioners 'had no wish whatever [to retain it] if the Corporation were willing to abolish it'.[72] Soon afterwards, at a meeting of the Council, Emanuel Emanuel formally moved that a clause abolishing the fair should be introduced. 'Such a clause had received the sanction of the promoters of the bill; but as the Corporation were the lords of the manor, their willingness to forego their rights to the tolls must be expressed.' The proposal was carried with only one dissentient voice.[73] In due course the bill was introduced into Parliament and passed both houses,[74] but since by early July it had not received royal assent, the stallholders and showmen were able once more to gather in the heart of Portsmouth and, for the last time, carry on the tradition that had started in the reign of Richard I.

It was undoubtedly a gala occasion. R. H. C. Ubsdell, the artist, who lived at 135 High Street, wrote to Sir Frederic Madden: 'The fair was one of the largest ever held – the booths and standings going to the top of the High Street, a show caravan was opposite my door . . . for the want of room on the Parade. From Harrison's doorway [no. 81],' he continued, 'I have made a drawing of the last fair showing all the shows with a standing on either side as foreground.'[75] William Tarring, only seven years of age at the time, recalled in old age the occasion when he had 'assisted at its funeral'. He described the different kinds of gingerbread on sale with their 'delicious aroma all around', the toy stalls, performing canaries, fire-eaters, peep-shows and, inevitably, Richardson's theatre. Among the well-known characters he remembered was the eccentric Alice Melville, commonly called 'Queen Anne', whose standing was near the High Street chapel. All too soon the 'long summer days of indolence and mirth'[76] were over. 'Just a peep at the coconut shies, etc. in White Hart Row,' Tarring concluded, 'and we said goodbye for ever to the Free Mart Fair.'[77] After July 1847 only memories were left.

No one had had much to say in the fair's defence; Free Mart had been swept away in a torrent of abuse and disapproval. The High Street shopkeepers had been fiercely divided, and those with a vested interest in its continuance had never found a spokesman to present a properly argued case. Henry Slight, who 'felt that it was at the risk of some imputations on his moral character that he should stand up for the fair', did put forward some points for consideration at a meeting of the Council in 1841. 'The evils complained of, which certainly did exist, arose not from the fair itself, but from the introduction of Vauxhalls. If the fair be done away, so ought the regattas, which were fruitful of as much mischief.' Councillor Burbey agreed and said that 'he had always found more complaints arising from debauchery during the three nights of the regatta, than during the whole period of the fair'.

Slight also drew attention to the loss of revenue that would result from abolition. Despite talk during the early nineteenth century that the fair was in decline, the extant financial evidence suggests that this was not so and that the town was still receiving a useful profit from this source (see Tables I–III). But while the borough income as a whole increased dramatically as the century progressed, the revenue from stallage represented a declining percentage, since it continued to fluctuate in peace-time, with notable exceptions, between approximately £40 and £70. Moreover, as Daniel Howard pointed out, 'the expense of maintaining the additional number of prisoners' arrested at fair-time, 'was more than a set off against what was received'.[78]

To many Portmuthians, particularly those of the younger generation, the abolition of Free Mart Fair meant the loss of a valuable social amenity. How strong and vocal was their opposition cannot now be estimated, but when, in early July 1848, fair-time approached once more, the populace was sternly warned by the authorities that it was illegal, on pain of a fine not exceeding £10, for anyone to attempt to revive it, and that the magistrates were 'fully determined to deal with any complaint brought to them'. At the stroke of midnight on 9–10 July, however, some of the aggrieved dispossessed, described by the unsympathetic *Hampshire Telegraph* as 'a set of dissolute vagabonds', gathered in the High Street and called for the glove to be put out. 'Apparently rife for some mischief,' the newspaper reported, 'they created great disturbance; but the magistrates, with the police, were promptly on the spot, and by their energetic interference, after apprehending those who appeared to be the most turbulent, the tumult was soon quelled . . .' In due course eight men appeared in a court 'crowded to excess', having with 'a large concourse of people', it was alleged, caused 'a great disturbance'. As they had been in police custody overnight, seven were discharged with a reprimand, but the eighth, Charles Purchess, who had 'excited the mob to assault and resist the police', was fined 50s. with 7s. costs. On 10 July a further uproar occurred when 'a large concourse of people' assembled noisily outside the house of Mr Emanuel, the leading abolitionist. Some of his windows were smashed, and George Kelsey, a navvy of hitherto unblemished character, who was said to have encouraged the crowd by calling 'break them, break them', was ordered to enter into a personal recognizance of £20 with a surety of £10 to be of good behaviour for the next six months.[79] The



same night, the stallholder Alice Melville ('Queen Anne'), apparently the worse for drink, vented her anger on Emanuel by throwing a bottle of ink through his drawing-room window,[80] as a result of which action, the *Hampshire Telegraph* reported, the justices 'sent her Majesty to *durance vile* for the space of three days'.

Meanwhile, despite notices posted all over the town reporting the fair's abolition and warning that anyone trying to revive it 'would be visited with the utmost penalty that could be inflicted', James Deacon from Petworth, and his assistant, Alfred Barber, arrived in Portsmouth and attempted to erect a roundabout on Grand Parade. For this impudent behaviour they were arrested and, although they protested that they thought the fair was to be held as usual, were brought before the magistrates who found their plea unconvincing and fined Deacon the maximum £10 and his man £2.[81]

The extinction of Free Mart Fair left a vacuum which local enterprise soon tried to fill. The lessee of the High Street theatre opened at half-price on two evenings during the traditional fair-time. Across at Gosport, after unsuccessful attempts a few weeks earlier, a three-day fair was held in a ten-acre meadow adjoining the Vine Inn on the Stoke Road, despite the opposition of the local magistrates, and during this brief period the floating bridge, which extended its service until 11 p.m., carried 6,890 foot passengers from and to Portsmouth. 'It was attended with all the clamour and interference connected with such demoralizing associations,' the editor of the *Hampshire Telegraph* reported sourly, 'and we trust effectual efforts will be made to prevent a renewal of this nuisance on any future occasion.'[82] That year, for the first time, excursion trains ran from Portsmouth station to Cosham (day return 1s., 9d., 6d., according to class), and 15,000 people were said to have availed themselves of this exciting novelty to attend the second day of Portsdown Fair.[83] But even this alternative to Free Mart was doomed. When the land on the hill was purchased by the War Department for the construction of new forts ('Palmerston's Folly'), an Act of Parliament[84] officially discontinued it (1862), although as a pleasure fair it lingered on into the twentieth century on various sites.

During the period 1750–1850 many English fairs were abolished. Denounced almost universally as nurseries of vice and crime, and feared because of the potential threat they posed to public order, they were particularly vulnerable if unchartered and devoted exclusively to the pursuit of pleasure.[85] Portsmouth Free Mart did not escape despite its impeccable origins and vestigial commercial activity. The fact that it was held in the heart of the populous old town under the windows of many of the governing body and, just as importantly, under those of the editor of the *Hampshire Telegraph*, meant that its worst features did not go unnoticed, particularly in the early 1840s, when the newspaper produced a constant stream of anti-fair propaganda. But if, as Dickens remarked when describing Greenwich Fair, it was for many young and normally restrained people 'a periodical breaking out . . . a sort of spring rash, a . . . fever which cools the blood for six months afterwards',[86] it was also, especially during the

daytime, a comparatively innocuous source of pleasure for respectable, sober-minded inhabitants and visitors, as is clear from various eye-witness accounts that remain. After 1847, despite the abuse to which it had been subjected, and the development as time passed of new and more sophisticated kinds of leisure activities, many old residents still recalled nostalgically the excitement and the glorious upheaval the fair had occasioned. It was ironic that in 1897, fifty years after its abolition, a genteel version under royal patronage was presented in aid of the Royal Hospital building fund, but so different was it in character from the original that among the stalls was one organized by the British Women's Temperance Association.[87] By then, however, leisure fairs had become respectable and taken on a new lease of life.[88]

More recently Free Mart has been revived as an annual event. Except in its name it bears little resemblance to that vigorous July jollification which for more than six and a half centuries brought a dash of bright colour to the grey lives of many generations of Portmuthians and their neighbours. 'It served its time,' wrote W. H. Saunders, 'it answered its purpose, and when old memories are conjured up, let us deal gently with them.'[89]

APPENDIX

Portsmouth Fair

Ye pastoral nymphs, rustic shepherds, and swains,
Your crooks throw aside and now quit your plains,
To Portsmouth all haste where pleasure invites,
With all that the senses or fancy delights:
For every age, here is dress and diversion –
On land, or in air, you may take an excursion;
On horses all day, you, with safety, may ride,
Without fearing their kicking, or starting aside;
For strange though it seems, they'll travel all day
Without moving a foot or wanting of hay;
Or, e'en should you wish to give 'em some corn,
They'll not take a grain from evening till morn.
Or, if riding's your fancy, to Jones's repair,
Who will teach, by example, the true 'questrian air,
For young Saunders on horseback such feats will display,
As will really surprise the serious and gay.
And here you may see Dramatics in taste,
With dresses betrimmed with scissors and paste;
In their cheeks, you will find the rose full in bloom,
Though red lead is their colour, hog's grease their perfume.
Though humble their stage, here's a Roscius may play,
Who a Garrick may prove, or a Cooke of the day.
For barns have been famous alike in all ages,
For the staff of our lives, and the staff of our stages.
Here's come dextrous Lane, who rivals old Nick,
In a cut or a shuffle, or clean shifting trick;
And, to your surprise, he'll certainly show,
How a Christian may baffle a Turk, or a Jew.
Here are gingerbread watches, but that's nothing rare,
For we've them all the year as well as at Fair;
As sailors well know, who've more money than wit,
Nor caution enough to avoid being bit.
Here monkeys, baboons, and apes play their pranks,
As if in derision of much higher ranks;
Where coxcombs, like monkeys, old maids fondly dandle,
Though of life they have left but the snuff of a candle.
Here are lions and tigers in cages enclosed,
Where oppressors and robbers I would have all disposed;
For such as are seeking whom they should devour,
Should be sent, as wild beasts, to be caged in the Tower.
And here, grand to view, Alexander is fighting,
Who, like Jack-in-the-box, is to babies delighting;
Who, fond of Bo-peep, through glasses will stare
At all penny-shows to be seen in the Fair.
Here fops may on gingerbread queens please their sight,
And taste their sweet charms from morning till night;
But let them not pester fair ladies of merit,
Who sense, wit, and beauty, and fortune inherit,
For these should in favour of worth all declare,
To make human life as blithe as our Fair.

Anonymous. From *Hampshire Telegraph,* 20 July 1801.

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8 W. White, *History, Gazetteer and Directory of Hampshire and the Isle of Wight* (London, 1859), p. 147.

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11 *New Book of Fairs*, p. 28, where the fair was said to be for 'shoemakers, hatters, milliners, mercers, cutlers, cabinet-makers, linen and woollen drapers, silversmiths' goods, apparel ready-made, and bed furniture'.

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Buildings of Portsmouth and its Environs by D. Lloyd, 1974 (Bound and well illustrated).

Hampshire Studies Edited by John Webb, Nigel Yates and Sarah Peacock, 1981 (Illus.).

Copies of these publications are obtainable from the City Secretary and Solicitor, Civic Offices, Guildhall Square, Portsmouth PO1 2AL and the Central Library and Museums.